

U.S. must protect Air Force women

By Rep. Louise Slaughter

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Across the nation, victims and activists recognize April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month. It is highly unfortunate that one of the most recent, high-profile stories of sexual violence comes from an institution that trained many of our men and women serving overseas: the Air Force Academy.

The government promotes policies to protect women from abuse, yet this government institution has ignored a culture of violence against women for years. It is time for serious change.

Earlier this year, the Air Force Academy revealed that 56 women reported being sexually assaulted or raped there since 1993. Officials acknowledge that the actual number of cases is likely much higher because the climate of harassment and intimidation at the academy keeps so many women from reporting crimes committed against them. A January 2003 survey showed

that an alarmingly high percentage of female cadets reported having no faith in the academy's ability to protect them.

These revelations were just the most recent in a series of reported sexual assaults that have rocked the Air Force Academy over the past decade. Female cadets report being ostracized and blamed for bringing on assaults. One young woman, a top student who refused to put up with a male student's stalking and harassment, now finds herself an outcast, denied her academy degree. She says her dreams of becoming an astronaut have been shattered.

Predictably, reforms have been introduced and investigations launched. The academy has announced it will replace four top leaders at the school and has developed new measures to protect women and ensure that complaints of sexual assault are handled properly. Investigations have commenced at the Department of Defense and the academy itself.

In addition, Congress has passed a wartime supplemental appropriations bill containing funding for an independent panel to look into how the academy has handled the persistent problem of rapes and sexual assaults.

However, the same pledges for reform were made a decade ago, yet the horrifying problem persisted. Several years ago, I met with then-Air Force Secretary Sheila Widnall to convey my serious concerns about the situation at the academy. She assured me that they were being dealt with. I am dismayed that here we are, years later, still talking about how to handle the

same terrible problem.

We must do more, and we must be serious this time about change. I recently joined other members of Congress in writing to John Roche, secretary of the Air Force, to express our grave concern about the Air Force Academy assaults and offer recommendations for reform. My co-signers and I believe that the academy needs to develop an orientation program for all cadets to change attitudes toward women and assault at the academy. Comprehensive support services for cadets who are assault victims, including mental and physical health care, must be developed.

The academy should also guarantee that all claims of sexual assault are thoroughly investigated and that all victims receive due process. Strong sentencing guidelines must also be enacted to ensure that these serious crimes are not met with weak, short sentences, as has happened in the past.

The military has contended for years that women should not be in combat because it is too dangerous. Who would have thought the threat to women in the military begins before they even reach the battlefield?

That this culture of harassment and violation at the Air Force Academy has continued despite its continued public exposure over the past decade is a national disgrace. Congress will be vigilant in ensuring that the proposed reforms are instituted quickly - and successfully. How dare

we ask these young women to risk their lives to defend our nation overseas, then fail miserably to defend their safety and dignity at home. Our brave women in uniform deserve much better.